

PUBLIC DISCUSSION

"CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND: BETWEEN LABOR MIGRATION, INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS AND EXTENDED FAMILY"

Sofia, 12 December 2022- 9am-1.30pm

Serdica Hall, Balkan Hotel
5 Sveta Nedelya Square, Sofia

This event is organised by the [Ombudsperson of the Republic of Bulgaria](#) and [ROMACT](#) Joint Programme of the European Commission and the Council of Europe

The Ombudsperson's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria is an independent national human rights protection body, which has Statute A under the UN Paris Principles. The Ombudsperson has made the protection of children's rights a sustainable priority in her work, with the rights of vulnerable groups of children and families being the focus of her attention and activities.

The National Ombudsperson has established herself as an active and recognizable advocate for children's rights, intervening to protect them with the full palette of institutional and societal capacities at her disposal, including through recommendations, mediation, legislative proposals, public debates and denunciation of bad administrative practices.

The Ombudsperson's mission is to alert society and institutions to the problems that children, families, and professionals working with and for children face every day - violence, abuse, ineffective and uncoordinated public systems, discrimination, and systemic barriers to the effective exercise of their rights. In order to fulfil these objectives, the Ombudsperson seeks to support and stimulate the development of an effective and meaningful dialogue between the civil sector and public authorities in Bulgaria, as a guarantee for the formation of sustainable public policies based on evidence and data. It builds sustainable partnerships with civil society structures to achieve qualitative change and public and institutional respect for children's rights. The institution has become a familiar and sought-after meeting ground for discussion, debate and dialogue for the expert community and key child protection authorities.

ROMACT is a Joint Programme of the Council of Europe and of the European Commission with the main objective to promote the social inclusion of marginalized communities at the local level, including the Roma. The Programme targets the improvement of local democracy, the accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness towards Roma citizens and thereby the improved delivery of services.

ROMACT works towards strengthening the capacity of local authorities to perform their roles and responsibilities in an effective and efficient manner, by helping them to design and implement more inclusive plans, policies, and projects and to access resources that would support the active inclusion of Roma at the local level. The Programme has been active since

2013 and is presently implemented in Bulgaria and Romania. Its interventions at local level, involving local authorities and members of the Roma communities represent an added value to the evidence from the ground that is brought up to different (national and European) levels to better inform policies and practices in relevant fields.

One of the issues encountered at local level during the ROMACT interventions is the enhanced vulnerability of children left behind in marginalized Roma communities by parents going abroad for work (other terminologies can be found such as “transnational families”, “euro-orphan”, “home alone children”). While working abroad might bring improvement to the financial situation of the family on the long run, leaving the children behind without a reinforced protection network (supported by relevant stakeholders – e.g.: social protection services, school etc.) might put certain categories of children in a situation of risk, especially in communities with limited access to basic services.

The children left behind phenomenon is recognized as an issue in different countries in Europe where legislation and policies were designed to address it at national and local level. However, all these sometimes fall short in being put in practice effectively and fail to properly protect the wellbeing of the affected children and family members. Moreover, capacities of relevant stakeholders to deal with the extent of the issue are not sufficient and better assessments and planning need to be joint in for specific interventions.

In other countries, although the issue is prevalent at local level and seem to affect some of the most marginalized communities, situation is not assessed, and these children are not considered officially as being at risk, therefore not being addressed by any targeted policy. In this case, data needs to be collected and awareness raised at the level of policymakers so that relevant policies should be designed, and procedure put in place to protect the wellbeing of the children left behind in marginalized communities, including poor Roma communities.

In the localities where ROMACT works, poverty and exclusion are a common denominator for the Roma communities. Poor living conditions, poor services and insufficient investments and interventions keep these communities in perpetual insecurity. Migration for work purposes is prevalent there as in other layers of the society, with potential to improve status and conditions, but with a higher immediate potential of risk. When the children are left behind in already excluded communities, often poor Roma, with family members back home who are not entirely able to offer proper care and without the necessary qualified networks of support from the side of the social protection services, the school or other local authorities and civic organisations, their vulnerability is deepened and action from the side of the policymakers and practitioners need to take place.

The 2020 Report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on the Impact of labour migration on left-behind children highlighted the fact that “Leaving millions of children without parental care is a mass violation of human rights, and an unnecessary threat to the stability and prosperity of our countries. Targeted ad hoc measures are not enough to improve the situation. To maximise the benefits of labour migration, while eliminating its harmful consequences on children left behind, all countries need to acknowledge the scale of this phenomenon and the long-term damage it creates, and to put into place comprehensive approaches to labour migration, which are child-centred, human-rights based, gender-sensitive and socially and economically sustainable.”

Based on the abovementioned Report, PACE Recommendation 2196 (2021)¹ and Resolution 2366 (2021)¹ address the often-underestimated impact of the labour migration, the invisibility of vulnerable left-behind children and the attention and care that needs to be given to them by relevant stakeholders.

The new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027): “Children’s Rights in Action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation” mentions “the children left behind by their parents due to labour migration” among the categories of children in vulnerable situations. Moreover, the Strategy mentions the fact that the Roma and Traveller children are among the “unacceptably higher” proportion of children “at risk of poverty and excluded from social services or equal access to education”.

The aim of the event is to raise awareness about the vulnerability of Roma children left behind in poor and marginalized communities by parents going abroad for work, in order to stimulate policy development and reinforce targeted action on the ground.

The discussion will be attended by leaders and experts from responsible Bulgarian state institutions, academia, the ROMACT Programme; the Vice-Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, a representative of the Steering Committee on the Rights of the Child (CDENF) of the Council of Europe, the PACE Rapporteur on children affected by labour migration, the Head of Mission of UNICEF – Bulgaria. Members of the Parliament, deputy ministers and representatives of civil society are also invited.